

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

1. Name of Property

historic name Davis Chapel

other names: Roberts Chapel; Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church

site number: DHR #100-5015-0006

2. Location

street & number 606-A South Washington Street not for publication N/A city or town Alexandria

vicinity N/A State Virginia code VA county Alexandria (Independent City) code 510

zip code 22314

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official

Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register

 See continuation sheet.

 determined eligible for the National Register

 See continuation sheet.

 determined not eligible for the National Register

 removed from the National Register

 other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

Name of related multiple property listing African American Historic Resources of Alexandria, Virginia.

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RELIGION Sub: religious facility
church school
EDUCATION school

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RELIGION Sub: religious facility
church school

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

LATE VICTORIAN Sub: Gothic

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK other _____
roof METAL
walls BRICK

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☐ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

☒ A. owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ B. removed from its original location.

☐ C. a birthplace or a grave.

☐ D. a cemetery.

☐ E. a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ F. a commemorative property.

☐ G. less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE

Sub.: Black

EDUCATION

Period of Significance 1834-1953

Significant Dates N/A

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Builder: William Veith

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (See footnotes in Statement of Significance.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form
Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church
City of Alexandria, Virginia
Multiple Property Listing: African American Historic Resources of Alexandria, Virginia

☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other state agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acree of Property 2,039 square feet

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	18	322150 4296460	2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____	4	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.					

Verbal Boundary Description

Alexandria, VA: Map 80.02, Block 02, Lot 16.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lot which is historically associated with the Davis Chapel.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Elizabeth Calvit for the Office of Historic Alexandria
organization City of Alexandria date August 1994
street & number 301 King St., P.O. Box 178 telephone 703-838-4554
city or town Alexandria state VA zip code 22313

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Summary Description

Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church is a two-story, brick, vernacular Gothic Revival-style structure, with a standing-seam painted metal roof. Constructed in 1834, it is located south of King Street in the 600 block of South Washington Street in the African American neighborhood referred to as "the Bottoms." It is the largest structure and the only church on the block of one of the most prominent streets in Alexandria. Distinctive features include an ornate facade of decorative brick and stained-glass windows, flanked at either end with small brick towers topped with slate-roofed pinnacles and decorative metal finials. The primary facade fronts South Washington Street to the west. The building was extensively remodeled in 1894 with the addition of a new facade, entrance, narthex, and stained-glass windows.

Detailed Description

The facade is constructed of pressed brick in a running bond pattern and is divided into five bays. Small brick towers flank each corner of the facade and are finished with a slate-roofed pinnacle topped with Gothic-style decorative metal finials. Three narrow string courses of projecting molded brick run horizontally across the entire facade connecting the window arch springpoints. A projecting course of moulded brick also follows immediately below the rake moulding. The brick entrance architrave projects slightly from the facade and has a flat rooflet with a rusticated white stone cornice. The entrance surround features a variety of decorative, textured, and moulded brick forming pilasters flanking a semi-circular arch. The arch has been filled with late-twentieth-century oak doors with glass panels and sidelights.

The facade of the church includes a series of stained-glass windows, with four small windows at street level, another series above the entrance, and a vernacular circular stationary stained-glass Gothic Revival rose window in the gable. On the first level, two pairs of double-hung windows with stained-glass panes flank the entrance. Over these windows is a projecting band of brick above soldier-course jack arches. On the second level, two sets of paired, lancet-arched, stained-glass windows are on either side of a larger, central pair of lancet-arched stained-glass windows. All of the stained-glass windows have rusticated stone sills. The stained-glass windows are composed of geometric patterns of different colored glass. The front gable parapet has a sheet metal raking cornice and the gable is topped with a metal finial and cross.

The two side elevations are five bays wide. On the north and south elevations, there are two rows of evenly spaced stained-glass windows. On the south elevation, there are two door openings, one in a later addition and one in the easternmost bay of the church. Between the doors are three windows that are evenly spaced and are positioned under three of the five windows on the second level. There are two different brick patterns on the sides, indicating additions to the structure. The older section of the

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church is laid in six-course American bond brick. The brick in the later front section of the building is laid in eight- course American bond. The standing-seam metal roof of the sanctuary is pierced on the south side, in the section added in 1894, by a small chimney stack serving the furnace in the basement.

There is a one-story, flat-roofed, mid-twentieth-century brick addition that abuts the east end of the church. There have been extensive modifications to the interior of the building since it was constructed.

Interior Description

The sanctuary is a vernacular basilica plan with a raised platform at the east end containing the organ, choir, and lectern. Fluted wood pilasters and a trabeated entablature frame the plastered, semicircular arch surrounding a niche containing the exposed pipes of a ca.1895 organ, located at the east end on axis with the center aisle. A window in the organ pump closet south of the organ, encapsulated and plastered over when the kitchen was added to the east, now has a metal flue pipe running through the exposed sash. This 6/6, mortise-and-tenon sash is painted dark green and may be an original, mid-nineteenth-century window.

The walls throughout are plaster on masonry. A mezzanine on three sides is supported by thin, cast-iron columns with a fluted shaft and Gothic capital. The low knee wall balustrade around the mezzanine is formed of panels made of late Victorian-era beaded boards topped by a late-twentieth-century wrought-iron safety railing with cast-metal floral insert panels. The ceiling on the bottom of the mezzanine is covered with 1' x 1' acoustic tiles.

Woodwork in the main sanctuary was almost entirely replaced in the mid-to-late 20th century. A spherical globe light on a turned wood post sits at each side of the projecting raised platform. These light posts and the turned balusters and newel posts at the kneeling rail appear to date from the Victorian period. The remainder of the woodwork is late-twentieth-century plywood paneling. The pews, choir seating and lectern also appear to be twentieth-century. Within the sanctuary, only the 1" x 8" wood base board and cap mould in the mezzanine appear to have been installed prior to the 20th century. There is no visible evidence of the original heating system. The present heat is hot water radiators fed by a boiler in the small basement below the 1894 west addition. The present sanctuary flooring is vinyl tile with carpet in the aisles.

All of the interior doors in the church are flush without any paneling and probably date from the late twentieth century. An exception is the basement entry door in the entry vestibule at the west end of the building. This door is a four-panel design with reeded 1" x 4" door trim, bull's-eye corner blocks, floral cast-iron hinges and brown ceramic knobs.

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Fragments of this Victorian-era door trim and baseboard remain in the west section of the building and are probably original to the 1894 addition. The flooring in this section is carpet over 1" x 4" tongue-and-groove wood boards on circular sawn joists installed with cut nails. There is a small basement with mechanical equipment below the west section of the building. The crawl space below the sanctuary is not accessible.

The original ceiling is hidden above the 2' x 4' lay-in acoustic tiles except at the center of the sanctuary space. Here the new ceiling is held back to expose roughly six square feet of pressed-tin ceiling. Within the pressed tin is an ornate, late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century, four-foot-diameter pierced cast-metal escutcheon, from which hangs a late-twentieth-century brass chandelier.

The windows on the second floor of the west wall are double lancet arches with stained glass set in an early-twentieth-century geometric pattern. The rectangular, wood frame casement windows on the other three elevations are also filled with stained glass in a similar geometric pattern, with diamonds and hexagons in deep yellow, blue, and green colors with a rose and purple border. The windows were restored in 1974.

A simple, one-story, mid-twentieth-century addition containing a kitchen, meeting room, and bathrooms is located east of the sanctuary. The doors in this area are two-panel types with ball tip hinges and stamped bronze knobs. Vinyl flooring is installed on the concrete slab floor. Walls and ceilings are plaster with fluorescent light fixtures. Bathroom fixtures date from the 1950s.

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church is historically significant because it is the oldest African American church structure in Alexandria. It is associated with the contexts of educational development, because it was the site of one of the oldest existing schools in the city. It is also associated with civic developments because it was, and still is, an important social gathering place for African Americans. The building's architectural history demonstrates the evolution of the building, from 1834 through 1953.

Historic Background

Roberts Chapel, as it is known locally, began in 1830 when a small group of men, both white and black, purchased a parcel of land for the African American members of Trinity Methodist Church, a predominately white church in Alexandria. The African American founders included Francis Hoy, James Evans, Philip Hamilton, Moses Hepburn, and Simon Turley. The black members of Trinity's congregation numbered almost 400 and it was felt by many that these members should have their own church. Construction began on the new church, but the Nat Turner Rebellion interrupted the process. White residents living near the new church objected to the location of the new church, and the congregation was forced to search for a new parcel of land. A new site was chosen on what is now South Washington Street and the new church was completed in 1834. The site was located between two emerging neighborhoods "the Bottoms" and "Hayti." The church was called Davis Chapel, named after the Reverend Charles A. Davis, the white pastor of the new church.¹

Davis Chapel, later known as Roberts Chapel, was the spiritual home of many prominent businessmen and local leaders of the African American community including Moses Hepburn, Philip Hamilton, Simon Turley, William Claggett, Austin Triplett, and John Credit. Women active in the church included Millie Triplett, Sallie Minor, Fannie Mark, Betsy Harris, Delilah Hamilton, and Susan Smith. During a period of racial separation and social tensions, Roberts Chapel provided a safe haven for African Americans to meet and visit with friends and family. Members were drawn from around Alexandria and even Maryland because it was one of only two African American churches in the city between 1834 and 1846.

¹ James Howard, "History," in *Anniversary Celebration: Bishop's Visit and Mortgage Burning, Roberts Memorial Chapel Methodist Church* (November 1943), 9-16.

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Church leaders recognized the need for a Sabbath and a secular school in the early years of the church's existence. During this period, there were no restrictions on African American schools. Local residents and church members organized a Sunday school and a secular school that offered adults, who could read and write, an opportunity to learn more. Men such as Alfred Parry, a local school master, helped organize the school along with Richard Garrett, Peter Madella, Edward Evans, Henry and James

Gibbon, and Miss Bruce. The school operated until 1846, when it was closed due to the retrocession of the city to the state of Virginia. City and Virginia state laws prohibited African Americans from attending schools.² African Americans were also denied freedom of movement and were required to be in their houses by 10:00 p.m. each night. Another state law prevented five or more African Americans from gathering together, whether it was a social, religious, or any other kind of meeting. Meetings held at Davis Chapel were not exempt from this law and church leaders were diligent in adjourning meetings before the 10:00 p.m. curfew so that their members could make it back to their dwellings.³ Although the laws imposed on African Americans made their lives more difficult, it did not prevent them from continuing to pursue their fellowship.

Racial tensions also affected the leadership of the church. In 1845, the Methodist Episcopal church split over the issue of slavery and the Rev. Davis chose to align himself with the Southern Methodist Church.⁴ When this happened the church decided to change its name. Bishop Robert Richford was a deceased bishop and his name was suggested by Philip Hamilton, a member of the congregation. In 1845, the congregation voted and the church became known as Roberts Chapel. More recently, it was changed to the Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church.

The school at Roberts Chapel was encouraged to reopen in 1862 when the city was occupied by

²Ibid., 14.

³Howard, "History," 10.

⁴Fern C. Stukenbroeker, *A Watermelon for God: A History of Trinity United Methodist Church: Alexandria, VA 1774-1974* (Alexandria, VA 1974), 156.

Federal troops during the Civil War. Permission to reopen the school first had to be obtained from the
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provost marshal for the city. Once permission was received, church members opened a school in the church as well as a Sunday school and a secular schoolhouse in the neighborhood surrounding Roberts Chapel. Missionaries from northern religious groups were in Alexandria during the Civil War, and they took an active role in the Roberts Chapel Sunday school. Since that time, Sunday school and the need and ability to provide both a spiritual and secular education have been of prime importance to the congregation. As public schools in the city were established for both blacks and whites, the role of the church changed. But education has been and continues to be an important part of the church's mission.

Roberts Chapel was also an anchor to the African American neighborhoods growing up around it. Three neighborhoods surrounded the church. One was known as "the Bottoms," located to the west, the second was "Hayti," located to the northeast, and the third was "the Hill," located southeast of the church. As households were established in these neighborhoods, services such as churches and small businesses were established and created a small community for African Americans. Residents from these areas, as well as others from all over the city and beyond, attended Roberts Chapel.

The church has also been a leader in the local Washington community. In 1864, it organized the Washington Annual Conference, the first conference for African Americans in the Methodist church. There have been three conferences held at Roberts Chapel, the first in 1875, the second in 1883, and the third in 1908.⁵

The evolution of the church is evident in its architecture, and the modifications and changes to the exterior and interior reflect a growing congregation and the resulting changes in needs. These changes are a vital part of the history of the church. They reflect the growing size, wealth, and status of African Americans and should therefore be looked upon not as a liability to the architectural integrity of the building, but as an asset.

Roberts Chapel has been an important part of African American life in Alexandria, Virginia since its founding in 1834. It was a safe haven for the community of both free blacks and slaves during the difficult years of repression and provided opportunities for education and social and spiritual fellowship. It has also been a physical and emotional anchor to the African American neighborhoods surrounding it. It is one of the few structures remaining in the city with such a long history, spanning the years of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the twentieth century. It was and continues to be an important part of the African American community in Alexandria and it has played a significant role in the development of the city of Alexandria.

⁵Ibid., 15.

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Section Photo **Page** 7

All photographs are of:

ROBERTS MEMORIAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Alexandria, Virginia

VDHR File Number: 100-5015-0006

Elizabeth Calvit, exterior photographs

Kristin B. Lloyd, interior photographs

All negatives are stored in the archives of the Department of Historic Resources in Richmond, Virginia.

DATE: April 1994

VIEW OF: exterior facade of Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church, looking east.

NEG. NO.: 19169: 22

PHOTO: 1 of 16

DATE: November 15, 1995

VIEW OF: 1st floor, sanctuary, view of altar, looking east

NEG. NO.: 19029: 3

PHOTO: 6 OF 16

DATE: July 1994

VIEW OF: Close up of entrance of church.

NEG. NO.: 19170: 20

PHOTO: 2 of 16

DATE: November 15, 1995

VIEW OF: sanctuary, pulpit, northeast corner

NEG. NO.: 19029: 9

PHOTO 7 OF 16

DATE: July 1994

VIEW OF: Side elevation of church, looking southeast.

NEG. NO.: 19170: 19

PHOTO: 3 of 16

DATE: November 15, 1995

VIEW OF: lamp on right side of pulpit

NEG. NO.: 19029: 24

PHOTO 8 OF 16

DATE: July 1994

VIEW OF: Exterior of church, looking northeast.

NEG. NO.: 19170:21

PHOTO: 4 of 16

DATE: November 15, 1995

VIEW OF: sanctuary, post supporting balcony, looking north

NEG. NO.: 19029: 7

PHOTO 9 OF 16

DATE: July 1994

VIEW OF: Side elevation of church, looking north.

NEG. NO.: 19170: 22

PHOTO: 5 of 16

DATE: November 15, 1995

VIEW OF: window on north side of sanctuary

NEG. NO.: 19029: 12

PHOTO 10 OF 16

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DATE: November 15, 1995
VIEW OF: sanctuary balcony, looking north
NEG. NO.: 19029: 6
PHOTO 11 OF 16

DATE: November 15, 1995
VIEW OF: sanctuary looking west, balcony
choir loft
NEG. NO.: 19029: 14
PHOTOS 12 OF 16

DATE: November 15, 1995
VIEW OF: molding around basement door
located in vestibule between building entrance
and sanctuary door
NEG. NO.: 19028: 3
PHOTO 13 OF 16

DATE: November 15, 1995
VIEW OF: sanctuary, ceiling chandelier
NEG. NO.: 19029: 4
PHOTO 14 OF 16

DATE: November 15, 1995
VIEW OF: 1st floor, original beam visible in
utility closet located behind sanctuary
NEG. NO.: 19028: 2
PHOTO 15 OF 16

DATE: November 15, 1995
VIEW OF: choir loft floor molding, looking
south
NEG. NO.: 19029: 16
PHOTO 16 OF 16